

Place-name perspectives on the Saami past

The importance of multidisciplinary source criticism

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Abstract

This paper presents some basic methods for studying early modern and prehistoric times of Saami communities with the help of place-names. The main aim is to point out the fundamental significance of source criticism in such studies. The roles of linguistic and cultural information in place-name studies are also discussed. As an example, a study on the place-name family Guivi by T. I. Itkonen is revisited and some relevant previously unpublished archaeological material is reported. Finally a framework for a well-constructed study that combines place-names and cultural information is presented.

Keywords:

place-names, source criticism, sacred places, Saami languages, Saami cultures.

Introduction

For a long time, archaeologists have used place-names and tradition connected to place-names as additional evidence when studying archaeological cultures, especially in periods near or right before modern times. Every now and then the use of place-name materials to support archaeological interpretations has been considered non-problematic – most probably because everybody

uses and has knowledge of place-names in everyday life. However, like all fields of study, also place-name studies, *onomastics*, has its own particular rules, limitations, and source-critical problems that are not common knowledge and are not connected with the everyday use of place-names. In addition, since both linguistic and cultural knowledge are connected to place-names, onomastics includes an extra challenge as it combines two research entities.

Place-names are often used in studies concerning past communities about which little or no written historical sources exist, such as Saami communities. This practise is problematic, since in these cases there is very little evidence that can be used to evaluate the interpretations made from place-names. Saami place-names are especially challenging, since Saami communities are minorities spread over a long and narrow area and surrounded by and intermingled with several majority communities. This means that individual Saami languages are separately connected to neighbouring majority communities and with languages that have origins in different language families and cultural spheres.

This paper discusses some important traits in linguistic methods that should be taken into account in studies that combine archaeological, or other non-linguistic, data with place-names. As an example of a research project in which archaeological, ethnographical, and linguistic

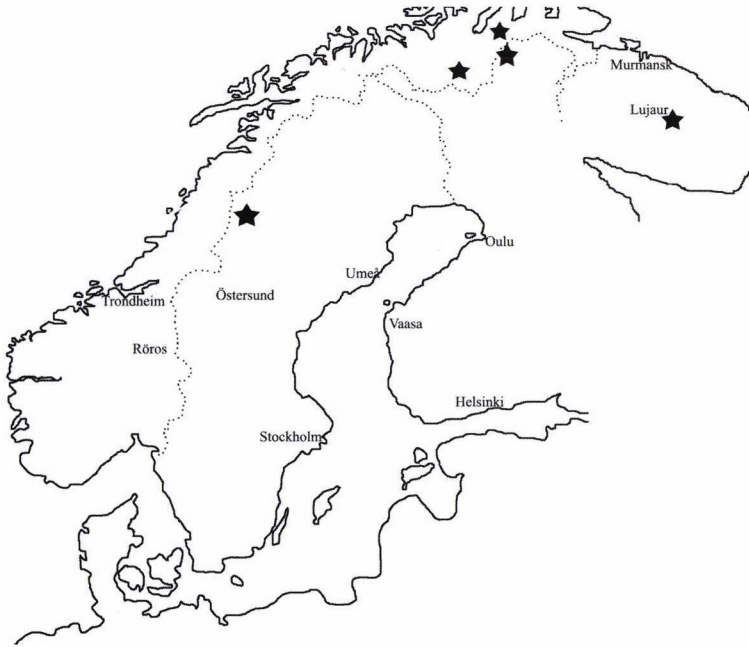


Fig. 1. The *Guivi* place-name family in Fennoscandia. Starting from the west:

- *Guivie* in Storuman in Sweden,
- several *Guivve*- place-names in Guovdageaidnu and in Porsángu (Porsanger) in Norway,
- two *Guivi* place-names in Ohcejohka in Finland,
- several *Kuiv* place-names in Lujaur in Russia.

data are successfully combined, the study on the *Guivi* place-name family by the famous Finnish researcher Toivo Immanuel Itkonen (1891–1969) is presented. The *Guivi* names are in some areas connected to pre-Christian Saami sacred sites and tradition, which makes them an interesting and many-sided example. In the article *Kuivi, ein heiliger Ort der Lappen* (1962) Itkonen reported his research on the *Guivi* place-name family (Fig. 1). His strict source criticism and lack of ideological bias make this study a perfect example of a good place-name study where cultural aspects are also included.

As a starting point in this paper, archaeological data from one of these *Guivi* places, the *Guivi* mountain of Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) in Finland is presented. Following this, the features of place-

name materials as an archaeological source are discussed. Finally, the process of linguistic and cultural source criticism that Itkonen used is dealt with.

The archaeological material from *Guivi* of Ohcejohka

According to the local Saami tradition, the *Guivi* mountain, situated in the middle of the Báišduottar (Paistunturi) wilderness area, has been regarded as a sacred place. Very little is known about the beliefs or practices connected to this place, but it is probable that *Guivi* has been one of the central sacred mountains of the area. The status of the place as a sacrificial site has been verified by survey finds made in 1961

and 1999–2002 (Itkonen 1962: 127, 129–131; Valtonen 1999; 2000; 2002).

The first survey of the *Guivi* mountain in Ohcejohka was planned by T. I. Itkonen in the early 1960s. Itkonen wanted to know if it was possible to confirm the oral tradition about the status of the mountain as a holy place. The field trip was realized in 1961 when a geodetic survey group led by Erkki Nickul and including his co-workers Artto Sverloff and Antti Semenoja visited the place at Itkonen's request.

Erkki Nickul and his companions found and documented six separate deposits of reindeer antlers in a stony area near the top of the mountain (Fig. 2). There were two types of deposits. Four deposits (A, B, E, and F) contained antlers of reindeer bulls and were clearly visible: the

antlers were just places next to large boulders. The two other deposits (C, D) were hidden beneath or behind stones and consisted of tightly and carefully arranged antlers of female reindeer. These finds proved that the *Guivi* mountain was in fact a sacrificial site.

Further visits to the site took place in 1999–2002 when several surveys were conducted in Báišduottar by the author of this article and archaeologist Mikael A. Manninen (University of Helsinki). During these surveys, the antler deposits found by Nickul and his co-workers were relocated with the exception of one of the two covered ones (D). Since Nickul's visit, the number of people, mainly hikers, visiting the top of the mountain had multiplied. As a consequence the visible deposits had been badly

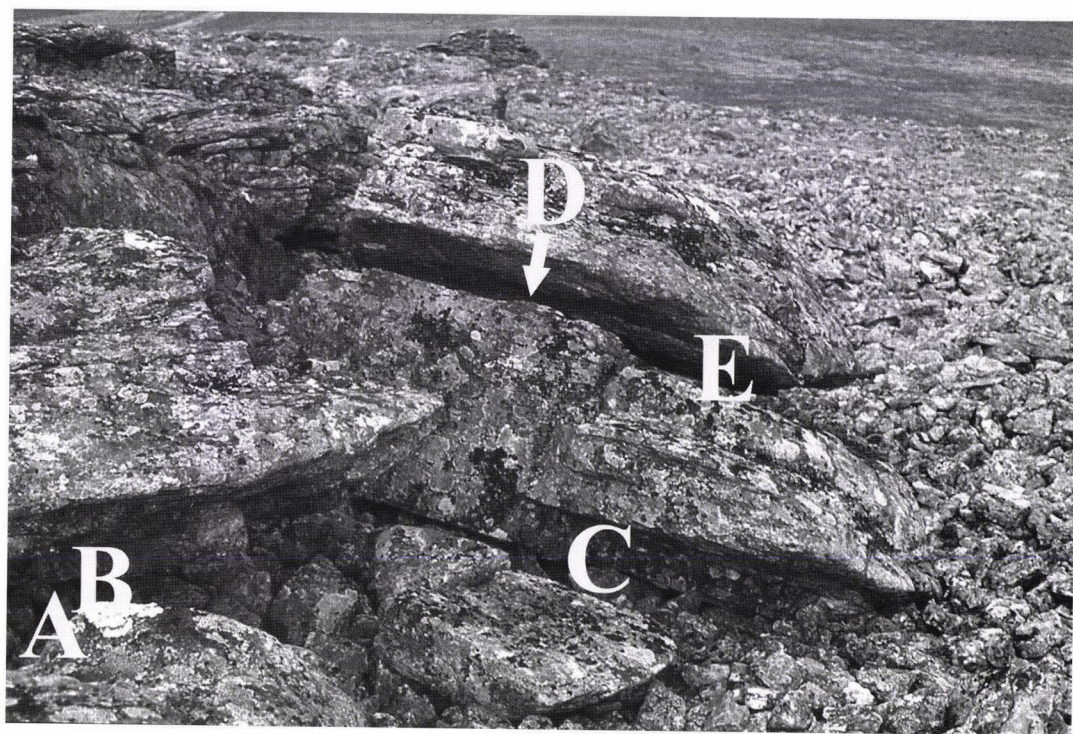


Fig. 2. The locations of the five antler deposits found in 1961 near the top of the *Guivi* mountain in Ohcejohka, Finland, in their present state. The deposits are located in an area approximately 6 metres long. Photo: Mikael A. Manninen.

disturbed. Even the covered deposit C was not left untouched. In addition to the deposits found in 1961, a previously unknown offering site was found at the mountainside of *Guivi* during the documentation of a storage pit site called *Gama-johka P 3*. It is a space between two boulders with some small stones and a small amount of water at the bottom. In this space, naturally shed antlers of female reindeer had been placed.

On the basis of the fieldwork finds, some preliminary interpretations can be made concerning the use, the users, and the time of use of the sacred mountain *Guivi* of Ohcejohka. The vast amount of archaeological sites in the vicinity of the mountain indicates that the valley areas around *Guivi* have had a central place in the utilisation of the Báišduottar area since the Stone Age (for details see Manninen & Valtonen 2006). The valleys are still an important early summer and late winter pasture for reindeer. It is very probable that *Guivi* has been used in earlier times by wild reindeer hunters. The use of the area by early modern reindeer Saami can be seen from the large amount of the *bearpmetárran* hearth sites and small storage pits (*geađgeborra*) located in surveys. According to the local tradition and the condition of the offered antlers, it can be estimated that the offering sites have been in use also after the beginning of the Christian time, probably until the 19th century.

Saami languages and place-names

Modern Saami languages are spread over an area that is approximately 1000 kilometres long, reaching from the Kola Peninsula in Russia to Dalarna in Sweden. There are ten Saami languages that can all be further divided into dialects. All these languages, however, share a common history. In other words, all the Saami languages have developed from a common proto-Saami language. With the help of comparative

linguistics, this protolanguage and its later development phases into modern languages can be reconstructed. The slow process of the splitting up of the proto-Saami language started around 500 BC and lasted at least until AD 300–800 (Sammallahti 1998: 1–2; Aikio 2000: 46).

The common origin of Saami languages means that all Saami languages have a core vocabulary that can be traced back to the common protolanguage. In addition to these words, all the languages have language-specific words that have been created by the speakers of that particular language. These words exist only in one or in a few closely related Saami languages. In addition, there are also loan words that have their origin in non-Saami languages. The loaning of these words may have occurred at any given time from the proto-Saami period to modern times. The source languages are also great in number: Finno-Ugric languages (Finnish, Karelian), Slavic languages (Russian), Baltic protolanguages, Scandinavian languages (Swedish, Norwegian, Scandinavian protolanguages), and even some Indo-European protolanguages. There are also some words that seem to be substrate loans from a language or languages spoken in Northern Fennoscandia before the period of Saami languages (Sammallahti 1998: 117–131; Aikio 2004).

There are at least two ways to approach the past of the Saami with the help of place-names. One way is to study place-names in some currently non-Saami area and try to find evidence of a Saami-speaking population of the past. The other way is to study the place-names of a modern Saami area and try to find information on the way of life of earlier times, connections between different Saami groups and areas, or influence of other cultures on Saami communities. In both of these approaches, one can study place-names with the help of different strategies used in cultural studies or with the help of lexicology, i.e.,

the study of words. In other words, the culturally oriented way is to study the tradition and ethnographic data connected to place-names or named places, for example, the naming motivation (i.e., the subject of place-names). In the lexicological approach, one can study the etymology (i.e., the origin of words) or loan connections of words that appear in place-names.

Place-names and the past: some source-critical problems

Written sources describing the early modern times and prehistory of Saami peoples are scarce. Because of this, the importance of place-names as a historical source is evident in Saami contexts. However, when there is only a small amount of material for study and comparison, strict source criticism becomes the most important aspect of correct Saami onomastics. Because all the classical place-name studies are mainly based on lexicology, it is good to keep in mind the three types of words that were mentioned above: the old common layer, later innovations, and loans. It is equally important to notice the limitations of different approaches, some of which are discussed in the following.

The study of cultural information included in place-names might appear in a sense much easier than etymologies, because information can be retrieved from the present form of the place-names, and because all place-names are potential sources. But in contrast to correctly created etymologies, the cultural approach has a lot of source-critical problems. The most important is that many interpretations are reliable only in the very limited local cultural context where the study is conducted, in Saami cases within one village or even solely in one family area. Usually single interpretations cannot be used as analogies to interpret other cases in other cultural or temporal contexts.

Cultural information can be studied from the vocabulary of place-names. The subject of the place-name can be interesting, even though in many cases place-names simply describe the named landscape. But, for example, if a place-name includes the word 'horse', it is quite beyond doubt that the giver of the name has known what a horse is. However, the name does not reveal whether horses were something special or something ordinary in the namer's cultural context. Neither does the Scandinavian loan word for 'holy' in a Saami place-name indicate that the Saami namers and users necessarily had any idea about the beliefs of the Scandinavian peoples. However, for example, Asbjörn Nesheim (1967) has opened very interesting perspectives on the Saami past when studying a sample of culturally descriptive loan words and their distribution in Saami languages.

One of the greatest pitfalls in studying cultural information in place-names lies in interpretations based on culturally motivated words that in some contexts have been connected to Saami people. Such cultural words are, for example, *reindeer*, *troll*, *kåta* ~ *kota* and names of ethnic groups such as *lappalainen* and *finn* ('Lapp'). The main problem with these words is that their occurrence can be explained in a multitude of ways that are all as likely to be true as false. These kinds of words in a place-name can be seen as true indications of a connection with the Saami only when supported by a reasonable amount of reliable cultural information or other sources. Usually even in such cases the interpretation can be applied only in a very limited cultural context.

Sometimes the cultural knowledge connected to a place-name, or in fact more often to the named place, is more interesting than the actual name. It is, however, very important to keep in mind that source criticism is as important as ever when one studies the tradition connected to

place-names. It is always better if there are other sources that support a given interpretation and, naturally, the larger the amount of similar cases, the more reliable the interpretations. It is also worth emphasizing that in order to avoid circular reasoning, the knowledge about the place-name and the tradition connected to the named place should be kept separate during the research process, since the real connection between the two may actually be missing.

Place-names and naming traditions are normally spread between neighbouring communities in a somewhat restricted area. But names with a special appeal can wander a long way from their original source. The several *Jerusalem* place-names in the Nordic Countries are a good example. In these cases, only the form moves and the meaning does not follow. In other words, it frequently occurs that a place-name is loaned, but the cultural interpretations connected to the place-name are not or are only partly adopted. It is also possible that the cultural material connected to a loaned name is integrated in the community's own old tradition, but the connection between the loaned tradition and the loaned place-name is broken.

Etymology is the most important tool when one tries to prove that in the past a Saami-speaking population existed in an area where there are no Saami living nowadays. With the aid of etymologies, one can study whether some of the place-names in a given area originate from a Saami language and whether they were given by a Saami-speaking people that once lived there. When performed correctly, etymological studies offer mostly reliable results, since they are based on laws of historical phonology. These in turn have been created on the basis of wide language materials and tested for a long period of time. Another good quality of etymological studies is that the results are relevant in a wide area, some-

times in the whole area where Saami-speaking peoples live today.

With the help of historical phonology, it has been found out in etymological place-name studies that there is a large number of place-names with Saami origin south of the present Saami areas in Finland. For instance, the Finnish place-name *Ilomantsi* has a Saami origin (Aikio 2003: 101–102). Old Saami place-names have also been found in areas outside the modern South Saami areas in Sweden and Norway. For instance, the Swedish place-name *Särvan* has its origin in a Saami language (Strade 1997: 181). Interesting examples of contacts between early Scandinavian and Saami languages have been detected in modern Swedish and Norwegian place-names: in some cases, a Scandinavian word has been loaned and used in a place-name by speakers of a Saami language. Later, when the Saami people have disappeared from the area, the place-name has been loaned back to the more recent Scandinavian languages, Swedish or Norwegian (e.g. Dahlstedt 1967).

Because of source-critical demands, it is not always possible to use etymologies. If one wishes to study the etymology of non-Saami place-names that one suspects to have a Saami origin, one must keep in mind the following three important source-critical limitations.

Firstly, **the studied words must not have a meaning** in the language/-s spoken in the studied area **nowadays**. Otherwise it is impossible to prove that the place-name could not have its origins in the language spoken by the present inhabitants. To take an example related to the case study on *Guivi* names, place-names like *Kuivilampi* in Southern Finland cannot be included into the Saami *Guivi* place-name family because the determinative part *Kuivi-* is also a derivative of the Finnish word *kuiva* 'dry' (cf. e.g. Itkonen 1920: 2–3; Dahlstedt 1967: 82 for discussion of similar cases).

Secondly, **the comparison must always be made between historical forms** and never between present-day forms of the words, since the loaning took place in the past. For example, the place-name *Guivi* has a seemingly good correlation with the Norwegian dialect word *kviva* ‘to buzz or whistle in the ears’ but comparison between the historical forms **kui’ve* and **hvina* makes problems obvious¹ (Itkonen 1962: 131; Torp 1919: 351, 353).

Thirdly, the presented **etymological equivalent must have some relevant meaning in connection to the named place**. For example, the often presented etymological equivalent for the determinative part of the Finnish lake name *Kukasjärvi* is the Saami word for ‘long’: *guhkes* (attribute form in modern North Saami). As the lake is long and narrow, one can find support for this etymological interpretation in semantics (cf. e.g. Aikio 2003; Dahlstedt 1967: 83 for discussion of similar cases).

Etymologies can also be used to study past relations between Saami communities and non-Saami groups. If there are loan words in the place-names (or in general in the vocabulary) of the studied Saami language from some given language, there must also have been some kind of interaction with the speakers of that language in the past. The nature and amount of these words reveal a lot about connections to different groups and about the nature of the interaction. Scandinavian loan words are especially interesting, since the time of use of old Scandinavian words can often be dated (Dahlstedt 1967: 83–84).

¹ The pair *Guivi* – *Kviva* makes a match because it is probable that a speaker of a Saami language would have pronounced the Norwegian word in such a manner because of the qualities of the phonological system in the Saami languages. However, it is not presumable that a speaker would have made large phonological changes, such as *h* > *k*- or *-n* > *-v*- in **kui’ve* – **hvina*.

The three holy *Áilegas* mountains situated near the *Guivi* mountain in the municipality of Ohcejohka present a good example of contacts between different language groups. With the help of historical phonology, J. K. Qvigstad has shown that the name *Áilegas* is derived from the Old Scandinavian word **heilagr* ‘holy’ (> *heilag*, *hellig* in modern Norwegian) (Itkonen 1962: 127).

Finally, it should be noted that there are some wider source-critical problems in place-name studies that are a consequence of research history. First of all, the quality and amount of collected place-name materials in Fennoscandia varies significantly. In Finland, place-names, also Saami place-names, have been collected systematically for more than a hundred years and the amount of archive collections is unique. In Sweden and Norway, the systematic collections are also very good when it comes to Swedish and Norwegian place-names, but the Saami materials are scanty especially from the Saami areas south of Norrbotten and Finnmark. In Russia the situation is even more diffuse.

Another research-historical problem is that the materials are written up in several different orthographies. A significant amount of linguistic knowledge and work is needed to transform the materials collected by different researchers into comparable units. The same applies to many place-names that are on modern printed maps. Negligence of this fact has caused problems in some place-name studies: apparent similarities between place-names have been detected even though the similarities are actually created by orthographical mistakes.

The Guivi place-name family and Itkonen's conclusions

To return from the methods to the practice of place-name studies, a short survey of the *Guivi* places discussed in Itkonen's study and the tradition connected to them is in order.

From Storuman in Tärna, Sweden, the place-name *Guivie* is known. It is actually the name of an offering stone (*verogerke*) that was situated at the bottom of the lake *Vojtjajaure* in the early 19th century. The stone resembled a man sitting at the bottom of the lake. The *Guivie* was destroyed by a Swedish settler in the 1840–50s, after which the once famous fishing lake lost its fish. No signs of the figure have been detected in modern surveys, but this place was nevertheless included in the site register maintained by the Swedish National Heritage Board (Bäckman & Kjellström 1979: 64–66; FMIS: Tärna 363: 1; Manker 1957: 252).

In Ohcejohka, Finland, there is also another *Guivi* place in addition to the *Guivi* mountain, an offering place called *Ivvár-Guivi*. The offering place is situated on one of the holy *Áilegas* mountains of Ohcejohka, namely the southernmost one, (*Gáregas*) *Áilegas*, near the hamlet of *Gáregasnjárga* (Karigasniemi). According to tradition collected by Samuli Paulaharju (1927: 309–310), one of the offering places at *Gáregas Áilegas* was called *Ivvár-Guivi*, which means the *Guivi* of *Ivvár*, *Ivvár* being a man's name. It was described as a place where the Saami in olden times offered to the god of *Áilegas*. Huge piles of reindeer bones, skulls and antlers, and some silver coins were found in a stony ditch at the foot of a large cliff. This place has not been located in modern surveys.

In the middle of the Kola Peninsula in Russia near the village of Lujaur (Lovozero), there is a mountain area called *Lujaururt*. In that area

by the lake *Sejdjaur*, there is a group of *Guivi*-places: the mountain *Kuivčorr*, on that mountain a steep cliff called *Kuivpaht*, and a figure in the cliff called *Kuiv*. The *Kuiv* is a gigantic dark-figure that looks like a man. This figure is formed by a darker stone inclusion in the otherwise light cliff. The local Saami have offered to this "Master of the lake" to ensure their fishing and reindeer luck. (Hallström 1921). The present writer has no knowledge of modern surveys in which any concrete signs of offering or other sacrificial activities would have been detected in the area.

In addition to the mountain *Guivi* of Ohcejohka and the above-mentioned place-names with holy connotations, T. I. Itkonen (1962: 132) mentions several *Guivi* place-names in Finnmark that do not seem to have any direct connections with religion. Such place-names are, for example, *Guivveskáidi* 'Guivi's landmass (between two rivers)' and *Guivvevárri* 'Guivi's mountain' in the municipality of Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino) (Qvigstad 1938: 111). Itkonen points out that there is a multitude of tax lists from the 16th and 17th centuries in the North Saami area in which the name *Guivi* and especially variants derived from it have been mentioned as a man's or family name. It is also worth noting that in all of these place-names, the word *Guivi* is a determinative part and in genitive, which normally points to ownership or use.

In his study, T. I. Itkonen comes to the conclusion that *Guivi* has originally been the name of a god of a mountain or a god living in a mountain, although there is no mention of this god in written sources. Whether it is the same kind of god in the whole area where the place-name occurs is a different matter. The man's or family name *Guivi* and its derivatives *Guive*, *Guivie*, *Guivia* and *Guivio*² Itkonen considers to be sec-

² Language historical development: *Guive*, *Guivie*, *Guivia*, *Guivio* < *kui'veje < *kui've > *Guivi*

ondary names made from the name of the god in the same way as the name *Apollonios* was derived from the god's name *Apollon* in classical Greece. A parallel from closer by can be found in the North Saami man's name *Beaivi* or in its Finnish variant *Päiviö* which also mean the sun. The sun is known to have been respected by the Saami as one of the deities (Itkonen 1962, 132–134).

Itkonen's argumentation follows a classical source-critical path used in onomastics. First all the existing place-name and cultural materials from all the reliable sources known have been collected. Then it has been controlled whether the collected material fulfils the source-critical demands. Naturally, the most important step in this kind of study is to check that place-names are really language-historically connected and do not only resemble each other for some random reason. The names *Guivie*, *Guivi* and *Kuiv* can all without exceptions be derived from the proto-Saami word **kui've* by following the systematic sound changes that occur in the development process toward the modern Saami languages.

The second source-critical step in Itkonen's study has been to check the cultural information and factors that might have affected it, such as the collector and the connection between the collector and the informant. Especially when one deals with the tradition connected to the indigenous Saami religion, the informants tend to be very careful in what they say or to emphasise certain aspects if the collector is, for example, a priest or the informants themselves have embraced deep Christian conviction. It is also good to keep in mind that tradition is not always reliable: especially place-names tend to produce new explanations and new tradition that are completely separate from the original tradition.

After Itkonen found the materials to be reliable, the linguistic and cultural materials have

been connected in order to draw conclusions. The first step in this kind of process is to check whether the materials support each other or whether there are problems. Itkonen has had at least two clear problems: there were two kinds of *Guivi* place-names: those with religious tradition and those without it. Further, there was only insecure tradition about the holiness of the *Guivi* mountain of Ohcejohka. At this stage, Itkonen made some efforts to acquire new information about Ohcejohka's *Guivi* by sending a team to survey it. The solution to the other problem was found when he realised that those *Guivi* names that were without religious tradition and morphologically different could be connected with a person's name in historical tax lists from the same area.

Itkonen's conclusions are supported by the fact that in the Swedish and Russian cases, there is a clear humanlike figure associated with the name *Guivie* or *Kuiv*. Also in *Gáregas Áilegas* there is knowledge about a god living in the mountain. All these places can also be connected with sacrifices. This means that there is no need to use the tradition from other Saami groups to interpret the place-names in the area of a given Saami community, i.e., the linguistic and tradition-based interpretations are independent but support similar interpretations.

On the whole, Itkonen's conclusions are actually quite cautious, or he does not wish to speculate as much as one could even within the limits of sufficient source criticism. For example, the distribution of *Guivi* place-names and especially the distribution of secular *Guivve*-place-names gives a clue that the origin of the name could be in the North Saami area. However, the material is too small to make unequivocal conclusions, since these place-names can have disappeared from other areas or they might just not have been collected thoroughly enough. If the place of origin of this tradition and name is in

the North Saami area, its dating should be much later than the splitting up of the proto-Saami language, maybe around AD 1000–1400. This dating supports the idea that the *Guivi* mountain in Ohcejohka would have originally been a holy place for the wild reindeer hunting Saami. The later use by the reindeer Saami can be seen as evidence of interaction between the older local hunter society and the reindeer herder settlers.

Conclusions

In this paper, some basic methods for studying early modern and prehistoric times of Saami communities with the help of place-names have been discussed, and as an example a study on the place-name family *Guivi* by T. I. Itkonen has been presented along with some relevant archaeological material.

Place-names can give us a great deal of new information about the Saami past, as the example of the *Guivi* place-name family shows, and it is strongly recommended that archaeologists continue using place-names as a source material. At the same time, the use of place-names in cultural studies can become a problem if place-names are used without strict source criticism and scientific dedication, only with the intention to gain support for political or fabulous theories. This kind of practice, in addition to being false, can ruin the reputation and value of all place-name studies in the eyes of the scientific society. Because of this, source criticism is the cornerstone of every reliable place-name study. If the studied material does not fulfil the demands of sufficient source criticism, it should be dismissed.

The source-critical study of a place-name and its cultural context can be divided into the following steps:

- 1) The collecting of the place-name material and the cultural material connected to it
- 2) The source-critical treatment of the collected material
 - Do place-names share common language history, i.e., are they really comparable?
 - Is the cultural material reliable; what could be affecting the material and how?
- 3) Conclusions from the linguistic and cultural material: do the materials support each other or are there some problems?

This frame can help the researcher to outline a study. In addition to the themes mentioned in the frame, it must be kept in mind that it is important to be very careful with analogies and interpretations that are not limited to those Saami communities from which the information is collected. Other problems might arise from the lack of material and partial or selective loaning between communities. The loaning processes can be very complicated: for example, the same words can have been loaned back and forth from one language to another. The dating of place-names and other language materials is also often very problematic.

Place-names and materials connected to them are heterogeneous and include at least linguistic and cultural materials. This heterogeneity can cause problems, since the researcher must have a multidisciplinary approach and an ability to use methods of different disciplines, and this is seldom the case. This, however, should not scare archaeologists from using place-names as a source material, since it is always possible to get help or consultation from specialists of another specific field of study, for example linguists. Such cooperation can be very rewarding for both partners and its potential and benefits should not be underestimated.

Acknowledgements

Many people and organisations have helped in the writing of this article. Special thanks go to Fil. kand. Marja Heinonen, VTM Erkki Nickul, MA Mikael A. Manninen and all the informants and helpers, dead and alive. I also wish to thank the staff at the Ethnographic photo archive of the National Board of Antiquities for help and the Nordenskiöld-samfundet i Finland r.f., Metsähalitus, Provincial Museum of Lapland, University of Oulu, and the National Board of Antiquities for financially supporting the archaeological fieldwork in 1999–2002.

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